

Dave Durenberger news

U.S. Senator for Minnesota



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DURENBERGER LEADS EFFORT ON HUMAN RIGHTS IN EAST TIMOR 47 Senators Sign Letter to Secretary of State Shultz

Washington, D.C. -- Senator Dave Durenberger (R-MN) led a bipartisan group of 47 Senators in sending a letter to U.S. Secretary of State Shultz raising concerns about human rights in the Southeast Asian island territory of East Timor. The letter also stresses the need for a negotiated solution to the 13-year-old military conflict in the territory.

Durenberger said "By sending this letter now, my colleagues and I want to ensure that the East Timor tragedy receives increased attention, both from the Reagan Administration and its successor. The long agony of East Timor continues. I hope this letter will remind the State Department of that fact."

East Timor, a former Portuguese colony roughly the size of New Jersey, was invaded and forcibly annexed by Indonesia in 1975. The Indonesian military limits outside access to East Timor and guerrilla war persists. International human rights groups and church organizations estimate that 150,000 East Timorese -- nearly one-fifth of the territory's population -- have perished from warfare, famine and disease over the past 13 years.

The letter to Secretary of State George Shultz, co-authored by Senator Carl Levin (D-MI), notes, "The memory of the disastrous war-induced famine which killed thousands of Timorese in 1978-80 makes us particularly concerned about the current situation."

The senators applauded Secretary Shultz for his willingness to raise the East Timor issue on several occasions during his tenure and expressed support for outside efforts to alleviate suffering in the territory: "We wish to insure that conditions do not deteriorate as a result of international inattention or increased levels of Indonesian military action. Therefore, international humanitarian organizations should be allowed to maintain and, where necessary, expand their operations to help provide relief and protection to the civilian population throughout East Timor."

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The letter also notes: "We are aware that certain improvements have taken place in East Timor in recent years. However, there is little doubt that armed conflict continues in the territory...We believe the continuing military conflict in the territory and any renewed shortages of food and medical supplies warrant the careful attention of the United States."

The 47 senators stated their concern about other aspects of the current human rights situation in East Timor, including: the transfer of Timorese political prisoners to the Indonesian capital of Jakarta, making family visitation nearly impossible; the inability of released detainees to return to their place of origin; the torture of Timorese under interrogation; and the denial of access to international human rights organizations.

In their letter, the senators note: "Freedom of expression for citizens of East Timor, including most Roman Catholic clergy, continues to be virtually non-existent."

Durenberger said, "Pope John Paul II called on Indonesia to respect the ethnic, religious and cultural identity of the predominantly Catholic East Timorese people in 1987. The United States Catholic Bishops Conference, in a March, 1987 statement, asked for official American efforts to secure "an authentic peace", and an end to intimidation of the Roman Catholic Church in East Timor."

"Today we are adding our voices to the chorus that will not remain silent in the face of injustice," he added.

The letter, signed by three-quarters of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, also called for a negotiated end to the East Timor conflict: "In recent months, there have been signs in various parts of the world that seemingly intractable conflicts need not remain so indefinitely. We believe that the United States could help bring the parties involved in the East Timor conflict to the negotiating table to begin a process that could end this 13-year tragedy. We hope that the United States, whether directly or indirectly, will agree to play such a role in the interests of peace and stability in that part of the world."

Durenberger has been a leading Senate advocate of human rights throughout the world. He has led efforts to call attention to the tragedy of East Timor for years. A 1982 letter gathered 16 signatures while today's letter has 47 -- a sign that Durenberger's work is paying off in greater interest among his Senate colleagues.

"I have been able to let the world know that the United States Senate is concerned about human rights violations -- wherever they occur. Even though the abuses in East Timor occur far from American eyes and receive little coverage in American media, I will continue to fight for those who cannot fight for themselves," Durenberger said.